What I've Come to Appreciate About Life in the USA

SOCIETY

A personal reflection on the everyday comforts and public resources in the U.S. that make life unexpectedly fulfilling.

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Photo by Andy He on Unsplash

I arrived in the United States in 2018 to pursue a postdoctoral research fellowship at Washington University in Saint Louis (WashU). Having already lived in the UK and traveled around Europe during my PhD, moving to the USA wasn't a major cultural shock. However, my understanding of the country was largely based on what I had seen in American movies. It has now been seven years since I moved—one year in Saint Louis, Missouri, and six years in Rockville, Maryland. During this time, I've come to appreciate aspects of life in the USA that I hadn't considered before, and I suspect many of my friends and relatives in India are unaware of them as well.

Recently, I've watched several Instagram reels and YouTube shorts comparing lifestyles in India and the USA. A common complaint is that people had more comfortable lives in India because domestic help was readily available, a service often too expensive for many in the

USA. As a result, household chores here fall to the individuals themselves. This contrasts with the idea that moving to the USA always means enjoying a lavish lifestyle. While it's true you can earn more here, you also give up certain comforts. That's why when people ask if they should move to the USA, I always ask them about their purpose. Do they want to explore the world, find a more satisfying job, earn money in the short term before returning home, or permanently immigrate? Do they understand what they're giving up, and do they have a realistic picture of life in the USA? Often, their expectations are shaped by social media, which tends to show only the glamorous side. It's difficult to grasp the reality of day-to-day life in another country unless you've lived there.

I've always wanted to travel and see the world, and I aspired to work with some of the most creative and successful scientists. I knew that achieving these goals would require giving up many comforts I enjoyed in India. Beyond my passion for travel and job satisfaction at the NIH, I've discovered many other facets of life in the USA that I never truly appreciated before moving here. These go beyond higher salaries or the prestige of living in the United States—things that aren't typically highlighted in social media reels or on the wish lists of new immigrants.

In this blog post, I'll focus on what I enjoy in the USA that everyone here benefits from simply by living in this country. I'm not referring to expensive malls, cruises, Las Vegas, or Disney World. Instead, I'll talk about things that cost nothing but are equally available to all, whether rich or poor—and which you often can't get in most cities in India, even if you're willing to pay for them.

Clean Water and Air

I drink the same water I bathe with. In the USA, water and air pollution levels are significantly lower than in India. Growing up in India, I never drank straight from the tap—it was always filtered. Here in the USA, although many people still use home filtration systems, the tap water provided by utilities is generally safe enough for drinking and cooking. It's essentially the same water you use in the shower. Of course, water quality can vary depending on where you live, and I'm aware there are places in the USA with poor water, but thankfully, that hasn't been my experience.

The same principle applies to air. Whether you're rich or poor, everyone breathes the same outdoor air. You might have high-end air purifiers at home, but once you step outside, we're all equal. And when it comes to outdoor air quality, the USA is far cleaner than any major city in India.

Public Libraries

I still remember the first time I walked into the Rockville Memorial Library—I was awestruck by the scale and quality of a public library in a relatively small city. As a county resident, I got my membership for free. When I asked how many books I could check out, I was told, “As many as you want.” I was blown away. Thousands of books, eBooks, audiobooks, CDs, and DVDs—available at no cost, simply because I pay taxes in that county.

Aside from my school library, I can’t recall visiting any public libraries in India. Now, every day during my commute, I listen to a free audiobook borrowed from the library. It’s an incredible resource for both entertainment and learning.

If there’s one thing I wish Indian cities would invest more in, it’s public libraries.

The Great Outdoors

The great outdoors is what gives real meaning to my life in the USA. From neighborhood parks to state and national parks, and vast, untamed public lands—nature here is both accessible and abundant. There’s no limit to what you can discover in the USA, whether it’s deserts, lakes, oceans, or mountains. Most of it is either free or costs little more than a cup of coffee at Starbucks.

There’s hardly a moment I don’t want to be outside—fishing, camping, hiking, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, you name it. I’ve done some of these activities in India, but only as a tourist at specific destinations. In the USA, I can enjoy them as regular hobbies. I don’t need to book a tour to go kayaking—I can rent one at a nearby boathouse or take my own kayak to a local lake and spend the day on the water.

Almost every neighborhood here has a trailhead that leads to a well-marked, well-maintained hiking trail. In India, government-managed hiking trails with official maps and public accessibility are rare. My brother, an avid hiker in India, has had to do extensive personal research to find trails—and he’s only been successful because he lived in places like Mussoorie and Shimla, where locals use these paths to traverse the mountains. In most urban areas, such trails either don’t exist or aren’t safe, especially for solo hikers—particularly women.

What makes the outdoor experience even more reassuring in the USA is the safety net. Emergency services are just a phone call away. I can’t imagine getting stranded deep in the woods in India and relying on help to find me. The USA not only offers incredible outdoor opportunities but backs them up with the infrastructure and safety to make them accessible to everyone.

Recreation Beyond Malls

In the USA, there is an abundance of free or low-cost recreation options that go far beyond malls and shopping centers. Growing up in India, recreation often meant playing in neighborhood alleys or streets for young children, and visiting malls for teenagers and adults. Well-maintained local playgrounds or easily accessible regional and state parks are still uncommon in most urban areas.

In contrast, here in the USA, I can take my kids to a neighborhood playground with swings and slides—completely free. Just a few minutes away, there's a regional park with even more to offer, also free of charge. A short half-hour drive gets us to a state park, where entry costs about the same as a cup of coffee. And if I'm willing to drive a bit farther, I can reach a national park or a property managed by the National Park Service. These public spaces offer a wide range of recreational opportunities for all ages—hiking, biking, picnicking, nature watching, or simply enjoying the outdoors.

I also feel fortunate to have lived in places with some of the best zoos and museums in the world—such as the Smithsonian Museums and the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., and the Saint Louis Zoo in Forest Park, St. Louis. All of these are free to the public, maintained at the highest standards through taxpayer funding.

Just next to Rockville, in Silver Spring, MD, is the beautiful Brookside Gardens. This serene botanical garden features several unique areas, including the Aquatic Garden, Azalea Garden, Butterfly Garden, Children's Garden, Rose Garden, Japanese-Style Garden, Idea Garden, Rain Garden, and the Woodland Walk. It's a peaceful, immersive space that celebrates the beauty of nature—and like so many public resources here, it's completely free.

Many other cities across the USA offer similar public institutions, making world-class educational and recreational experiences accessible to everyone. This kind of everyday access to well-managed public spaces makes life here feel incredibly rich and fulfilling.

Highways

The USA is built for cars—people enjoy driving here, and honestly, it's a lot of fun. While better public transportation would certainly help reduce traffic and benefit the environment, there's something uniquely enjoyable about taking long drives on American highways. Traveling long distances by car is not just practical, it's comfortable and often quite scenic.

I love driving my Honda Civic wherever and whenever I want. I don't have to worry about potholes, incomplete or unreliable maps, or the lack of roadside services. The infrastructure here truly supports road travel—well-maintained roads, clear signage, rest stops, gas stations, and service centers are all easy to find. And as I mentioned earlier, emergency services are just a phone call away if something goes wrong.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while moving to the U.S. meant giving up many comforts I was used to in India, it also opened my eyes to a different kind of richness—one rooted in everyday experiences that are accessible to all. Clean air and water, safe and scenic outdoor spaces, public libraries, free museums, and reliable infrastructure aren't flashy, but they significantly enhance quality of life. These are the quiet luxuries that don't often make it into social media reels but are deeply valuable once you start living with them. My journey here has taught me that a fulfilling life isn't always about what you earn or own—it's just as much about what you have access to, simply by being part of a well-functioning society.

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